

**Cultural Misunderstandings of Communication Among Exchange Students From
Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Spain at a Public University in Pereira**

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Licenciatura en Bilingüismo con Énfasis en Inglés

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Statement of the Problem

Governments around the world have launched norms and laws that intend to keep society's well-being and protect human beings' rights. Different countries have considered education as one of the rights established in their laws to guarantee that each citizen develops his cognitive, physical, affective, artistic, and social dimensions. UNESCO (Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura) not only states education as a human being's right, but it also recognizes pluriculturalism as cultural heritage. Unesco's first article explains that culture changes over time since each community has attributes that characterize its identity, and this diversity enables individuals to share, interchange, and produce ideas and thoughts. Thus, cultural diversity should be recognized as a heritage for current and future generations. Equally important, in article two, UNESCO indicates the necessity of living together and interacting harmoniously with communities that belong to different cultures. It is indispensable that policies assure the integration of all the community's members to guarantee peace and social vitality for people to develop their social skills.

Cultural pluralism is not only seen as economic development but also as a resource that enables people to develop their affective, cognitive, moral, and spiritual aspects. In this sense, UNESCO states that in Chile, the Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes and a study conducted by the program Acciona in 2016 reported that the teaching of arts and cultural components help people shape their integral development. They argue that

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this brings people benefits such as the development of civic values, gender equality, tolerance, sensitivity, and appreciation of diversity; strengthening of reflection and abstract thinking to solve daily problems. Also, it can foster the knowledge of their own culture and the communication with other ones. In this way, education, diversity, and culture are seen as components that build the human being's integral development.

Education is key to the development of intercultural comprehension. This is why all over the world, governments and different organizations have created certain programs related to the educational field that include an international component. One of those is ERASMUS+ (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), which is the outcome of the integration of the Youth in Action, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa, among other European programs implemented by the European Commission during the period 2007-2013. With two million higher education students and more than 500,000 young people involved in exchange schemes, ERASMUS allows cooperation and mobility among many regions of the world, mostly in education and youth. This increase of international programs and how well society has responded to it shows that individuals are becoming more interested in having international experiences because of the benefits they bring to their academic, professional, and personal lives. In this sense, people who develop intercultural comprehension skills are prone to take advantage of these opportunities for their integral growth.

This interest in transcending political borders evidences that being in contact with other cultures is pertinent for today's society. For example, a participant of the ERASMUS program has the opportunity to study abroad for a study period, which can

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bring many benefits to his life as he will acquire different knowledge and skills to be competent not only in his country but worldwide. At the same time, the interaction with a different culture can boost his respect for diversity, becoming a more empathic person and contributing to both his professional and personal growth. Another positive aspect of this program is that it aims to support the sustainable development of Partner Countries which include Colombia and other sixteen Latin American countries, and along with the Program Countries are part of the eligible countries.

Exchange programs have had a wide recognition in the international and national educational field, leading to the creation of different programs that allow students to make safe academic exchanges among countries since there are different entities and laws regulating those programs. Similar to ERASMUS, another well-known international program is Programa de Intercambio Académico Latinoamericano (PILA) which is the result of the agreement among el Consejo Interuniversitario Nacional de la República Argentina (CIN), the Asociación Colombiana de Universidades (ASCUN), and the Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior de México (ANUIES). PILA gives Colombian, Mexican, and Argentine students the opportunity to enrich their personal and professional life and promote the internationalization of higher education.

Programs like PILA are advantageous to improve cultural awareness and expand the students' points of view about the world since they spend a study period in another country sharing and understanding its practices, beliefs, and customs. Apart from the PILA program, in Colombia, Fundación MundoColombia facilitates the process of exchange programs by offering options such as summer camp and au pair. Similarly,

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most of Colombian universities have their own international agreements with different universities from Peru, Mexico, Argentina, and Canada. An example of this is a public university in Pereira where this research took place, which has international agreements such as CREPUQ and ASCUN, that invite students from other countries to stay there for academic purposes.

Colombia is a country where being part of an educational system is a right. For this reason, the political constitution and the Ministry of National Education (MEN) have launched different laws, articles, and campaigns to assure that this right is accomplished. For example, in 2017 the MEN launched the “Es tu día” campaign in Medellín city consisting of going door by door registering children to a specific school. The political constitution’s article 67 states that “Education is a right of the person and a public service that has a social function; it seeks access to knowledge, science, technique, and other goods and cultural values” [...] ¹. It is understood that education is the means by which Colombians can have access to Science, Maths, Language, and other fields. Public education involves high school and higher education such as universities and institutes.

The government expects that each citizen goes through an educational process that starts in basic education and finishes in higher education. For that reason, the government has established the Law 30 of 1992 that guarantees that each Colombian student has the right to participate in the process to be part of a public university. This law includes articles three, four, and five which entail that higher education should be autonomous, reflexive, and integral since it is key for an individual to grow up within the

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Colombian society. These articles also point out that each university has to establish specific requirements in order to filter and select the students. For example, the score that a student obtains in the national standard test ICFES (Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior) determines to which public university and program he can apply for. As most of the Colombian universities take ICFES as a requirement, students who get a lower score can be rejected.

The government is aware of the importance of internationalizing education, so they developed the Law 86 of 1958, which encompasses 11 articles that explain the agreement between Colombia and the United States of America to have exchange programs. For example, the first article points out the creation of “Comisión para Intercambio Educativo entre Los Estados Unidos de América y Colombia” which is in charge of leading and supervising all the process that exchange programs involve such as permissions, money, guarantees, among others. This kind of agreement is advantageous for each part since it lets them be known around the world, improve their economy, and expand their cultural awareness. Besides, the Law 397 (1997) first article mentions that culture should be protected and universalized since it is the basis of each society, involving language, values, and mental characteristics of a particular group. With this in mind, a university should prepare students to perform in different contexts and situations by offering reflexive, autonomous, and integral education including a cultural component.

This research took place in a public university that has also acknowledged the relevance of internationalization inasmuch as it benefits the institution and its community. International mobility includes receiving international students during a

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certain period, usually one semester, for academic exchange, practicum, or dual-degree purposes. The most recent report provided by the International Relations Office (ORI, by its Spanish acronym) from the previously mentioned university shows an increasing tendency on the number of foreign students arriving at its campus every year. This is evidenced by making the following comparison: From 2011 to 2013, the annual average was 24 international students, whereas from 2014 to 2016 the average was 57, doubling the previous one. Still, the highest one corresponds to 2017-2018, with an average of 73 international students in total.

All the previous results are key figures to prove that mobility is a phenomenon permeating all sectors of modern society. In the educational field, it is seen as a positive aspect because it fosters multicultural encounters, making the exchange of knowledge possible. Taking into account that internationalization is a bilateral process, the Colombian public university has also made efforts for students to participate in exchange programs by making agreements with institutions from different parts of the world. The most recent calls for scholarship applications published by the ORI invite students from sixth semester and on to benefit from the opportunity to study in Brazil or Mexico. These are countries from where exchange students have arrived this year, along with Argentina and Spain.

Professional and educational fields offer opportunities that demand people able to converse and interact with different cultures. Therefore, it has aroused an interest in developing studies focused on cross-cultural interactions. Some of them are “A study on Communication Breakdowns: Sources of Misunderstanding in a Cross-Cultural Setting” conducted by Korkut et al. (2018), and “What intercultural communication barriers do

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exchange students of Erasmus program have during their stay in Turkey, Mugla?” conducted by Keles (2013). These researches inquire about how intercultural interactions take place and whether or not there are barriers that impede assertive communication such as language, body language, perceptions, and stereotypes. These studies showed how the participants’ experience of living in another culture was to determine if there were communicative misunderstandings between two cultures. They concluded that participants mainly experienced misunderstandings in terms of eye contact, stereotypical notions, and prejudices. Different from these researches, we carried out our research at a public university in Pereira-Colombia, where little research has been conducted on cultural misunderstandings of communication. Moreover, the research studies analyzed in the literature review only present data collected from Turkish and European exchange students; instead, this study will integrate participants from four nationalities allowing us a wide panorama about intercultural interactions.

The purpose of this project is to ascertain if exchange students from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Spain experience cultural, verbal and nonverbal misunderstandings when immersing in Colombia since body language, eye contact, time perception, personal space, and idiomatic expressions vary from one culture to another one. The participants of the exchange programs arrive at a public university in Pereira, where they study one or two semesters in different faculties depending on their undergraduate program. Equally, this project aims to find if exchange students have encountered intercultural communicative roadblocks that impede communication among the cultures aforementioned. In order to inquire about this, a case study was carried out and analyzed in the light of different theories and students’ perspectives related to intercultural issues

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when coming to this country. This study focuses on exchange students from four different nationalities from both America and Europe continents.

The acknowledgment of intercultural differences will raise awareness of the importance of developing intercultural communicative competence. Thus, the information collected from exchange students could be used by the ORI of the public university to design and implement strategies in order to improve foreign students' experience during their stay in Colombia. This research expected to show the importance of integrating culture in language classes for students to be aware of cultural differences and avoid misunderstandings during intercultural encounters. Personally, having contact with international students provided us an opportunity to learn about their countries and culture, expanding the way we perceive the world. Considering that these interactions required understanding, respecting, and accepting participants' backgrounds, they allowed us to develop intercultural communicative skills. Those skills are essential for us, English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in development, as we are exposed to contexts that require effective multilingual interactions.

mostrar a través de la investigación la importancia de las clases de cultura para que los estudiantes al momento de la exposición de un encuentro cultural o multicultural para evitar malentendidos.

Research Questions

2. 1 General Question

What intercultural communicative roadblocks do exchange students have encountered at a public university in Pereira-Colombia during their stay there?

2.2 Specific Question

What do exchange students experience during their stay in 2020 at a public university in Pereira regarding intercultural communicative aspects?

Objectives

3.1 General Objective

Categorize the different types of communicative misunderstandings that exchange students experience at the Colombian public university according to Hofstede (2002).

3.2 Specific Objective

Identify through a semi-structured interview which cultural misunderstandings exchange students experience in a public university in Pereira when immersing in a new culture.

Conceptual Framework

Human beings are genetically engineered to live, interact, and coexist in groups with whom they share common aspects such as language, ethnicity, norms, and practices. Those elements shape a society that establishes behavioral patterns integrated by dress code, jargon, cooking techniques, religion, among others, creating its members' cultural identity. Based on this identity, people develop a belonging sense that projects others where they come from, and what their beliefs and customs are. As culture identity varies from one person to another, it determines how an individual develops his own perceptions and ideas about the world. This research will explain how some factors can influence people's behaviors when facing a new culture, taking into account that there are differences that may cause linguistic and behavioral misunderstandings during intercultural interactions. For that reason, the concepts of cultural identity, culture shock, enculturation, culture, intercultural communicative competence, language, stereotypes, acculturation, and ethnocentrism will be taken into consideration when exploring deeper the field of culture and intercultural misunderstandings.

Every society around the world is involved into a culture that encompasses values, beliefs, attitudes, and costumes, which are components transmitted from generation to generation. When someone ventures into a context with a different perspective of living and thinking, he can find that there are specific cultural patterns that differ from his own. As a result, he can experience different emotions that are part of

culture shock, Oberg (1960). This phenomenon may appear since each individual carries a particular cultural background and identity that are developed through the process of enculturation. At the same time, culture shock can lead to cultural misunderstandings impeding a natural and effective interaction. Therefore, developing an appropriate intercultural communicative competence is a crucial factor since language itself does not assure that someone will fulfill the behaviors and attitudes required in a new society. In the following constructs, the concepts of culture, cultural identity, culture shock, enculturation, and intercultural communicative competence will be expanded. Ting-Toomey (1999), Kohls (1996) and DeCapua and Wintergerst (2004) offer some contributions to the understanding of what culture is and what components are involved into it, which will be broached in this study.

4.1 What Does Cultural Identity Stand for?

Cultural identity definition has changed over the years since different authors define it based on their research, experiences, and perspectives. One of those authors is Tajfel (1978), who defines cultural identity as “That part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 63). This definition implies that an individual's identity is directly influenced by factors such as the experiences he lives within the social group he belongs to. Years later, cultural identity definition is expanded by Kim (2007) who indicates that it encompasses subcultural, national, ethnolinguistic, and racial components. An example of this is the case of Camila, an indigenous (race) skater (subculture) from Peru (nationality), who

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belongs to the Kichwa community whose language is Quechua (ethnolinguistics). The previous example demonstrates that an individual's identity is shaped and integrated by the four components proposed by Kim, which are acquired through social interactions within a determined culture.

Regarding the concepts presented by Kim (2007), Chen (2014) named them as cultural categories, adding gender and religion. She also points out that traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms, and customs are key elements that shape the individual and collective identity, which are transmitted from generation to generation. After analyzing the input provided above, cultural identity is a key concept regarding culture inasmuch as it encompasses important elements such as language, religion, and customs, which are involved in the development of the human being. In addition, being conscious of our own cultural identity helps us recognize and understand the diversity of other cultures, which according to Woszczyński et al. (2016), is greatly beneficial for individuals. One way in which we can recognize these distinctions is by analyzing cases where misunderstandings of intercultural communication occurred, and identifying the possible reasons that provoked them. Such exercise, as claimed by Eades (2003), can lead to a higher quality level or successful interaction. That being said, when being a participant or witness of a misunderstanding, we should not disregard it but see it as an open door or a path to the acknowledgement of our cultural identity and exploration of others that deserve the same degree of respect that ours.

4.2 How to Define Culture Shock?

Moving to a new culture can cause different feelings such as excitement, stress, anxiety, among others, due to the fact that each culture has its own values, beliefs, thoughts, lifestyles, and identities. The emotions mentioned above are experienced by people who go through a culture shock which is a process that occurs because of the lack of their familiar context and social environment (Oberg 1960). It can be understood as the feelings a person faces when living in a different culture. From a different perspective, Zhou et al. (2008) consider this phenomenon as an opportunity to learn how to interact with the members of a new culture. For that reason, people could feel that facing a new culture is a difficult process due to the social differences, but it is necessary to experience culture shock to accept and learn new behaviour patterns. Furthermore, this process could be endured when people rely on friends in the hosted culture (Furnham, 2010). In other words, Isabela is a Puerto Rican student who is part of an academic exchange in Canada. During her travelling arrangements and arrival in the country, she felt anxious and stressed regarding what she could find there regarding behaviors, habits, and traditions. However, months ago she had met some friends with whom she was going to meet when being in Canada. This helped her to diminish her levels of anxiety and stress in Canada, and be more comfortable in the country that she was not used to.

Culture shock is a mental stage that occurs when a person arrives at another culture with different behavioral patterns that he is not used to, as pointed by Samovar et al. (2012). This stage involves the excitement, disenchantment, beginning resolution, and effective functioning phases. Firstly, an individual has expectations about the host culture

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and how the experience would be. Once immersed into the new culture, the person faces the reality (disenchantment), leading to a gradual understanding of the behavioral patterns(beginning resolution), and finally acquiring the key elements of this culture (effective functioning). For instance, Maryory is a Colombian woman who always dreamt of living in Brazil, so at the age of 26, she moved to that country. When she visited her family in Colombia, she shared her experiences about living in the new country. She said: “I was afraid of going out and getting lost on the streets, and I felt frustrated when interacting with citizens in Portuguese. However, I started learning the addresses and the language”.

It is clear that Maryory went through the four phases of culture shock experimenting positive and negative feelings leading to her adaptation to the new setting, which can last a few days, weeks, or even months. Equally important, Harvey and Park (2014) explain that “culture shock is a disorder that occurs in response to the transition from one cultural setting to another” (p.355) meaning that people should adapt their usual patterns of behavior to the new ones. In the same sense, this cultural experience could affect social interactions in the new background if people can not control the emotions provoked by knowing a new culture (Saylag, 2014). In essence, culture shock is not lived by all the individuals in the same way; different from that, it is a process that can affect or help the adjustment process according to internal and external factors. Taking into consideration the previous contributions, it is evidenced that culture shock definition has maintained its essence over the years inasmuch as the authors agree that it is a mixture of feelings that occurs when living in a new culture. It is noticeable that a person does not experience culture shock when growing up and learning his native culture which is a process called enculturation.

4.3 What Does Enculturation Involve?

Society is divided into communities that have particular lifestyles, practices, beliefs, and traditions that represent their identity and culture. This last concept is related to enculturation defined by Hoebel (1949) as a process in which a person is trained to become a competent member of his culture without being aware of it. This contribution represents that each human being learns his culture along with his physical and mental growth, allowing him to show a sense of community belonging and to project appropriately his culture. Another author who views enculturation as a process is Parsons (1951), who also points out that the major goal of this process is to become more competent members of a society. Competent, in this case, is used to refer to how functional a person is within a culture that he understands and contributes to.

An individual needs to fulfill requirements such as behaviors, roles, and practices to function appropriately in his society (Kottak, 2007). In addition, Tang (2006) explains that those behaviors are an intrinsic piece of people's language. In other words, the way in which we behave sends a message about which and how is the culture we belong to. For instance, in Spain, Andres' parents teach him how to use the pedestrian walkway to cross the road, and give a kiss on each cheek when greeting. As a result of his learning, he will continue applying those practices during his life (enculturation process). All things considered, enculturation is an inevitable process that never ends inasmuch as culture is always changing, and even the most enculturated people are forced to adapt to new society's requirements and conditions and to behave according to new principles and norms. Unlike enculturation, acculturation is the process of adapting to a culture different from the one someone belongs to. This concept will be analyzed in more detail further on.

4.4 Is Culture a Fundamental Element of a Society?

The concept of culture has been studied by different disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and communication. In this sense, Kohls (1996) as a cross-cultural trainer, defines culture as the particular lifestyle of a community where its members share beliefs, practices, values, behaviors, and attitudes that are transmitted from generation to generation. This entails that each individual grows up in a group in which he learns particular means of thinking and living, which determines his behaviors as a member of that community. Another way to understand what culture means is by comparing it to an iceberg (Ting-Toomey, 1999), which implies that all cultures and societies involve visible aspects such as music, fashion, and trends. On the other hand, perceptions, beliefs, and values are considered invisible aspects. As an illustration, in Colombia, a visible aspect is eating buñuelos and natilla on Christmas, while an invisible aspect is the belief in the effects of the “Serenó”, attributing magical powers to night humidity.

The main components of culture have been already determined; still, DeCapua & Wintergerst (2004) contribute by pointing out that those components shape our perception of the world and how we react to it. Culture involves several factors both tangibles and intangibles, making it a complex term that requires to be studied from different fields in order to have a deep understanding of its nature and variations. In fact, Gamsakhurdia (2020) affirms that it refers to all the dynamics that imply a form of social interaction among members of a community (or between cultures). For this reason, it is important to have a well-developed intercultural communicative competence inasmuch as it is the capacity to effectively interact and communicate in terms of language and behavior with people from different backgrounds. Otherwise, meeting a new culture,

playing the visitor role, could be a potential risk (Walker, 2000) inasmuch as the person would not be aware of the behavioral patterns of that community, which could limit the enculturation process.

4.4 How can Intercultural Competence be Understood?

Staying in a different culture is a situation that might make people realize they need to acquire new capabilities or adjust the previous ones in order to adapt effectively within that new context. In this sense, specific characteristics considered essential to venture in different cultures have been gathered in a set that is currently known as Intercultural Competence. It is defined by Deardorff (2006) as a group of qualities a person needs to acquire in order to behave and interact successfully in cross-cultural scenarios. It may be understood as the capacity of adaptation a person has when facing a new environment. In the same vein, strengthening this ability brings a lot of benefits to one's life in terms of international achievements, interpersonal growth, and work development as stated by Deardorff et al (2012). To exemplify, Marina studied international business and has travelled to different countries, which requires continued interactions with foreign peers, chiefs, and people in general. Her effective interactions have improved their opportunities to get international jobs, allowing her to grow professionally. Leung et al. (2014) do not only consider this competence necessary when visiting new cultures but also in daily routine scenarios where interactions with members from other cultures occur. This means that the development of the abilities that it requires should be a priority for any person who wants to act appropriately in a multicultural setting, which is becoming the worldwide panorama. Even so, it is not possible to determine that an individual has completely achieved and developed the intercultural competence since cultures and languages constantly change (Byram et al. 2002). As an

example, it is the case of Esteban who prepares himself to face a new culture by looking for different information before traveling. However, this does not assure that his previous knowledge will allow him to effectively interact in each situation. That means that the real intercultural competence is acquired when immersing in the new context and learning how the community behaves.

4.5 What Does “Intercultural Communicative Competence” Mean When Venturing Into a New Culture?

Learning a language involves not only linguistics but also cultural competences to effectively communicate and interact with people from other contexts. Regarding this point, Bryam (1997) affirms that intercultural communicative competence is developed when speakers of a second language are able to convey a message in the target language and culture. If a Portuguese speaker learns English as a foreign language, and he travels to an English-speaking country, he develops this competence when he identifies what cultural and language patterns are appropriate in that country.

Correspondingly, Chen & Starosta (1999) focus on the linguistic and sociocultural components that cross-cultural encounters imply. They explain that intercultural communicative competence is an ability that an individual should develop when interacting and communicating with a person from another cultural background. Similar to Chen & Starosta's explanation, Spitzberg & Chagnon (2009) approach that intercultural competence is the functional interaction that people from different backgrounds establish by being conscious of their resemblances and distinctions. That is why, Bennett et al. (2003) explain how culture and language are related to convey an

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accurate message. It is not only necessary to know the linguistic code but also how the language works in a determined situation and context. In the same lines, being a competent communicator can be achieved by developing linguistic, pragmatic, strategic, and intercultural competences as Usó et al. (2006) state. This implies that functioning properly in a new environment requires a set of components in order to understand the hidden and visible aspects of a society.

This means that as humans, we should develop the ability to adapt and understand others' behavioral patterns to communicate appropriately and effectively by developing The fact that someone knows about the culture he will be part of will not ensure his successful integration to it if he does not know how to use that knowledge in real life. For that reason, Arasaratnam (2016) pinpoints that intercultural competence is a set of skills that enables a person to interact with members of different settings. Wiseman (2001) strongly supports Arasaratman's viewpoint, highlighting the importance of combining cultural knowledge with communicative skills that will enable adequate interactions among cultures. Both explanations entail that to adapt successfully to a new context, it is required to be at least aware of the performative and linguistic aspects.

Learning a new language goes beyond learning grammatical, syntax, morphological, and phonological structures. Indeed, Sandage & Jankowski (2013) explains it is key to have intrapersonal expertise and mental wellness to be interculturally competent. To illustrate, Helena is a Colombian girl with an advanced level of Portuguese, who obtained a scholarship to study one semester in Brazil; After two weeks there, she had an argument with another person and decided to immediately return to her home country. This example clearly affirms that it is crucial to have self-knowledge and

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emotional regulation, which are elements involved into the intrapersonal component, to successfully function into the new context.

Interactions can be hindered by many aspects, but misunderstandings are more likely to happen when speakers belong to different cultures. It is important to clarify that this is not a merely linguistic issue, taking into account that language is just one of the cultural components that can be a barrier to effective intercultural communication. Beliefs, world perceptions, and hidden aspects of a culture are some other factors that can affect communication between cultures. The concepts defined and explained above are a good starting point to the matters that this research was concerned with. At the same time, they facilitate the understanding of the situations that will be analyzed and discussed, turning those situations into opportunities for learning as Kinginger (2010b) suggested.

Exchanges can provide students an enriching experience in both academic and personal areas; nevertheless, there are cultural aspects that can be a barrier for the adaptation of a person to a new society. Most people would consider language differences as the main reason for a person to feel uncomfortable in another country or region, but there are other invisible factors that can make the adaptation process a challenging period (acculturation). For example, an exchange student with an ethnocentric way of thinking may feel that nothing around him is as good as it is in his country, resulting in feelings of nostalgia or general displeasure. At some point, he could even start stereotyping, that is, making assumptions of a certain culture based on the overgeneralization of his personal experience. This research will explain the concepts of language, stereotypes, acculturation, and ethnocentrism in greater depth.

4.6 Language or Linguistic Competence?

Language is one of the components that allows individuals to interact and communicate with others through written and oral resources. Through this innate capacity, people are able to acquire and share with others their own knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, ideas, feelings, and preferences. With this regard, Sweet (1900) affirms that language is a set of sounds and words that create sentences to communicate thoughts. This author emphasizes the psychological process that people experiment to let others know what they think or want. Likewise, the context is a component taken into consideration when talking about language as stated by Hall (2000), highlighting that it strongly influences the interpretation that is given to certain linguistic expressions. For instance, the word “perico” can be used to refer to a type of coffee, scrambled eggs, or a drug, depending on the Colombian region. Amberg & Vause (2009) explain that language and people need to be interconnected and share linguistic and social features to communicate effectively.

Other authors who agree with the fact that language is a system are Robins & Crystal (2019), pointing out that it enables speakers to perform different functions such as expressing themselves. Moreover, they establish that this system integrates conventions understood by a particular community that shares the same cultural patterns. For example, a group of Colombian friends is in a restaurant in Argentina, and one of them asks a waitress for a “tinto” (a cup of coffee). When the order is ready, she brings him a glass of wine, but he claims that he did not order that. This case illustrates that it is necessary to be aware of pragmatics when conveying a message and that, as Schyve (2007) warned, individuals whose first language is the same are also prone to cope with communicative differences. As shown above, language is not only a set of linguistic

units but also cultural and social aspects shared by a group of people. All these components allow human beings to express themselves, ask for information, and make suggestions, among other language functions.

4.7 Are Stereotypes Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication?

Language shapes each individual's perception of the world, and this perception allows him to conceive different realities leading to possible assumptions and preconceptions towards other people. This is where stereotypes take place and according to Alexander et al. (1999) it is hard to ignore those comments that we hear. To exemplify, Andrea is an university student who won a scholarship to study one year in Guadalajara, Mexico. However she decided not to accept it since she had heard that Mexico is extremely dangerous. This case remarkably indicates that those stereotypes can limit our worldview, so as humans it is required to be open- minded in order to overcome them.

When talking about stereotypes, it is necessary to take into account that there are cultural patterns that influence people's perceptions of other communities. In this sense, Dovidio & Gaertner (1986) suggest that stereotypes are always linked to a target group. What these authors express is that there are no individual stereotypes since they all affect a group of people who share cultural aspects that can vary from ethnicity to religion, and even music preferences. Dovidio et al. (2010) further assert that a stereotype is a conviction about the features and details of a specific community or group of people that each human has. It is common that during intercultural interactions, a person with preconceptions of a specific culture would expect to find the same behavioral patterns in all members of that culture. The following case exemplifies the previous idea: Daniel went to a party and met Javier, who is from Cartagena. After talking with him, Daniel

considered that Javier was very kind, so now he thinks that all Cartagena's inhabitants are kind too. As was exemplified, stereotypes result from the overgeneralization of a belief regarding a community (Barna, 1982).

It is a common belief that stereotypes are negative and misleading; however, Jones (1997) points out that they can be positive and accurate. An example of this is the belief that Asians are very intelligent, which no matter if it is accurate or not, it is in fact a positive assumption. On top of that, stereotypes are abstract pictures on people's mind regarding the world (Schimdt et al. 2007), which will remain in their memories unless they immerse themselves in that culture through the process of acculturation. Such experience is the only way a person can confirm or disregard if a cultural stereotype is accurate. In this way, he would see if those characteristics and behaviors are accurate and, eventually, he would even start acquiring them as evidence of adaptation.

4.8 Acculturation: Balancing or Adapting?

The contact with members of another culture carries a lot of challenges, changes, and adaptations. It occurs because that new culture is a new scenario where someone has to go through the process of learning its traditions, customs, beliefs, and lifestyles. This process is called acculturation. An author who contributes to the explanation of this concept is Redfield et al. (1936), pointing out that acculturation takes place when the members of a group belong to different cultures. For instance, “Lleva el Mundo a tu Casa” is a program in which a Colombian family hosts an exchange student for a certain time, and this coexistence allows them to share their cultural backgrounds. As a result, the student acquires behaviors based on the family habits.

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The process of acculturation does not mean that a person should change his own cultural identity. With this in mind, Berry & Sam (1997) mention that a foreigner will preserve his own cultural identity. To illustrate it, Mariana is a Colombian girl who lived for six months in Dombes, France. When she arrived there, she realized that the most emblematic dish is frog's legs. Although she liked it, she continued preparing and eating typical dishes from her country. By the same token, Gibson (2001) states that acculturation takes place when someone is in a social group, country, or society culturally different from the one that he is used to, as it is evidenced in Mariana's example. In the final analysis, acculturation is a process that requires being patient, open-minded, and humble since its success can be affected by someone's belief that his own culture is superior to others (ethnocentrism).

4.9 Is Ethnocentrism a Barrier for Communication?

When people decide to travel for a while to another country, they may face differences in terms of food, dress code, beliefs, traditions, and values. Some of them accept these distinctions and adopt new behaviors corresponding to the new culture (acculturation). Even so, some others may tend to believe and feel that their culture is superior to others, defined as ethnocentrism by Gumpłowicz (1881). This phenomenon implies that people do not show willingness to readjust their cultural patterns to the new ones, causing barriers to understand and respect the particularities of each society. One way in which ethnocentric ideas are evidenced is on the recurrent comparisons between the culture that is considered superior to the other. This is due to the fact that a person with this perspective or ideology tends to analyze and evaluate other cultures based on how much they resemble their own culture, as can be inferred from Sumner's (1906) definition of ethnocentrism.

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Ethnocentrism can be a strong barrier that impedes effective interaction since it can lead a person to hardly judge other culture's practices before going into that new culture and understanding it. An author who contributes to define this term is Ting-Toomey (1999), indicating that ethnocentrism refers to the belief that one's own culture is the best, and others are wrong or inferior. To put it another way, Katia is a Russian girl who traveled to Brazil. When she returned to her country, she told her friends that neither Brazil nor any other country is equiparable to Russia because this country is powerful and technologically advanced, and it can destroy any other country with its nuclear weapons. Katia's point of view clearly demonstrates how ethnocentric people perceive other cultures as inferior to their own.

Traveling abroad and knowing other cultures are enriching experiences for exchange students. However, this experience carries out a process of acculturation that can be challenging for people with cultural boundaries such as stereotypes and ethnocentrism, which impede understanding different cultural patterns. Therefore, being part of a culture involves the knowledge and comprehension of specific aspects such as language, practices, traditions, customs, among others. All of them play a key role in conveying a message since it is not enough to have a high language proficiency when interacting with new cultures. This requires acceptance, tolerance, and respect to conceive different realities. The acknowledgment of these concepts enabled us to identify if they are evidenced in our research participants' experiences, allowing us to make a richer analysis of the information they share with us.

There is not a person in this world who does not belong to or who has not been part of a certain culture unless he has always lived isolated. The external world not only

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influences but also molds people's identity, language, and culture. The three components just mentioned are acquired during the process of enculturation, and they can be strategically modified for the adaptation to a new culture through the process of acculturation. When growing up in their home city, people may not be aware of the fact that they start to be similar to the community that surrounds them. On the other hand, when they move to another country or region they do tend to be more aware of the aspects they need to change to match that new society, but sometimes some barriers may appear. One of those obstacles is the idea that our native culture is the best one, also known as ethnocentrism. That is why, when being in non-native contexts humans need to be open-minded, show respect and empathy, and forget any previous assumptions about a certain group of people (stereotypes). In addition, they should develop sociolinguistic skills to interact within that context; in other words, they need to use intercultural communicative competences. All of these aspects can be useful to avoid negative feelings during a culture shock, as well as to prevent cultural misunderstandings.

Literature Review

Learning a new language has become one of the main people's goals since it can bring multiple professional, academic, or personal benefits. Along with this learning, people have to face challenges and develop not only linguistic but also cultural competences. Through time, it has been analyzed and discovered that every society involves a culture, which is a concept that integrates components such as beliefs, values, attitudes, power, and verbal and nonverbal communication. According to DeCapua & Wintergerst (2004), "culture can also refer to a set of shared beliefs, norms, and attitudes that are used to guide the behaviors of a group of people, to explain the world around them, and to solve their problems" (p.14). Communication is considered one of the most common difficulties people find when venturing into a new culture inasmuch as they may ignore the accepted and unaccepted behaviors in the target culture.

In some societies it is believed that culture is universal; however, it varies from one society to another, causing misunderstandings of communication. Therefore, this research aims to identify if six exchange students from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Spain have faced misunderstandings of communication at a Public university in Pereira-Colombia when interacting with people from this country. Under these circumstances, our research took into account three research studies that focus their attention on the required cultural competence when cross-cultural interactions occur. These studies are "A study on Communication Breakdowns: Sources of Misunderstanding in a Cross-Cultural Setting" (2018) and "What intercultural communication barriers do exchange students of the Erasmus program have during their stay in Turkey, Mugla?" (2013).

To begin with, the research “A study on Communication Breakdowns: Sources of Misunderstanding in a Cross-Cultural Setting” was conducted by Korkut et al. (2018). Its purpose was to identify if there were misunderstandings in interactions between Turkish and exchange students who were part of the Erasmus program, in which students find the possibility to interact with speakers of different cultures. This study had the participation of 69 students: 39 Turkish students from three different universities, and 30 Erasmus students from seven different countries in order to collect data about the quality of communication, common areas of misunderstanding and perceptions of each participant.

The data was collected through interviews that consisted of five open-ended questions, which concluded that Turkish students perceived a better quality of communication with the exchange students. Regarding eye contact (nonverbal communication), they expressed misunderstandings in terms of inviting someone to go out and offering something. Different from this, exchange students perceived Turkish students as benevolent and helpful people. Lastly, this research explains that courses need to foster cultural activities that allow students to raise awareness of cultural differences. In the same way, further studies are necessary to identify other miscommunication patterns that can take place when people from different countries and cultures interact.

The second study taken as reference for this research is “What intercultural communication barriers do exchange students of the Erasmus program have during their stay in Turkey, Mugla?” conducted by Keles (2013), which aimed to determine the attitudes and beliefs of some European exchange university students towards Turkish

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students, and the barriers preventing effective intercultural communication between them. This study had the participation of 10 university students aged between 20 and 23, who were from different European nationalities. Those students answered six interview questions about intercultural communication barriers such as anxiety, language, nonverbal communication, ethnocentrism, and stereotypes. Thus, the research implemented a qualitative method since it gathered information of exchange students' perceptions and experiences.

This study concluded that unknowing the expected behaviors of a new culture caused anxiety in the participants since some of them had stereotypical notions about Turkish people such as: Turkey was a poor country, had inequality between women and men's role, was full of terrorists, and had a low-level life quality. In terms of language, European students stated that few Turkish students had a basic level of English. For this reason, it was difficult to communicate with people in daily life interactions such as asking for directions and getting off the bus. Lastly, nonverbal communication is another barrier that can affect effective communication since each culture has a completely different perception about gestures, proximity, eye contact, facial movements, and use of time and space when speaking. Therefore, the European students stated that Turkish people tend to look directly at you and to use hand gestures with a completely different meaning than the one given by European people. On the other hand, exchange students expressed that the conversations can be disrupted by the perception that Turkish people have about proximity, use of gestures, and touch. As exchange students explained that they stay close to the speaker, while European people prefer to keep their personal space.

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A national research article that was also reviewed for the development of this research is “La movilidad académica internacional: experiencias de los estudiantes de Villavicencio, Colombia y Coatzacoalcos, México” by Otero et al. (2018). The development of the aforementioned research started from the acknowledgement of an existing problem: The lack of information about Latin American students’ perceptions of being part of exchange programs. Otero et al. further explain this situation by adding that most of the information regarding international academic mobility processes found in Latin America corresponds to key figures reports, while qualitative aspects are disregarded or poorly acknowledged. In this sense, the objective of this research was to identify and analyze the perceptions about the experience of participating in an international academic mobility process of ten Mexican and six Colombian exchange students from the University of Los Llanos (Colombia) and the Universidad Veracruzana (Mexico).

To achieve the objective of this national study, the researchers used a qualitative approach with semistructured interviews as the data collection method. The context where this data collection took place was at two different universities in cities with similar geographic and social conditions, Villavicencio, Colombia, and Coatzacoalcos, Mexico. The interview was implemented to ten female and six male participants, whose ages ranged from 21 to 27 years old, and who were studying in a foreign city for academic purposes. The main finding obtained was that the most significant aspect of the mobility process was the contact with another culture. This finding shows that there is much more information to be studied than only figures of how many Latin American students had the opportunity to study abroad since their perceptions are crucial to the

study of many social and cultural phenomena. One of those phenomena is intercultural communication, which will be the main focus of analysis of our research.

As has been exposed, these studies are relevant for this research project since they analyzed the cultural differences between exchange and national students based on their perceptions, as will be done in our investigation but focusing on communication. Two of the researches taken as reference took place at different universities in Turkey where European participants faced a new culture with a different language. Similarly, this research took place at a university in Colombia, where exchange students from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Spain encountered not only linguistic but also cultural differences. Another aspect to highlight is that the articles provided us an input to predict and analyze some possible answers from participants. Likewise, previous researches contributed to the design of our data collection instrument as all of them collected qualitative data about participants' perceptions, opinions, and experiences.

Taking into consideration that the previous and the current study focus their attention on intercultural communication, the findings illustrate that people face misunderstandings in some cases because of stumbling blocks such as assumption of similarity, language differences, misinterpreting verbal and nonverbal communication, preconceptions and stereotypes, and immediate evaluation (Barna, 1982). However, as we live in a globalized world where intercultural interactions keep increasing, people need to understand that culture determines people's behaviors and conceptions in order to prevent misunderstandings. In the same way, developing empathy seems to be an essential component to communicate effectively in a cross-cultural context. That is why the authors of the previous studies stated that people should be aware of the different

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cultural patterns of behavior and communication that exist in order to have effective intercultural interactions.

Methodology

Research allows individuals to carry out an exhaustive study about a phenomenon. In this research, we studied how six exchange students perceived the Colombian culture at a public university, and what their experiences were during their stay there. Given that, we provided a detailed analysis and description of the different components involved when interacting with members of a new culture, being verbal and nonverbal communication two of them. For that reason, we implemented a qualitative research and a multi-case study to collect the data required for our research. Additionally, we used one data collection method, a semi-structured interview, that allowed us to gather information about exchange students. Given these points, in this part, we will describe how this research on cultural misunderstandings of communication was conducted at a public university in Pereira (Colombia), what characteristics and particularities this research had, and how we achieved the objectives proposed in this study.

6.1 Type of Research

Considering that individuals have an innate curiosity to learn and expand their knowledge about a specific field, research has emerged as a means of understanding why and how a phenomenon or situation occurs in a particular setting. In this case, our research resulted from the interest in inquiring how exchange students perceived our culture, and if they faced misunderstandings in terms of verbal and nonverbal communication (cultural roadblocks). Taking into account that we wanted the research to

provide us meaningful insights about participants' perceptions, we chose qualitative research since according to Denzin & Lincoln (2005), it is a set of techniques to observe, represent, analyze, and interpret the events and phenomena presented in a particular context, integrating how people perceive and understand their surroundings and the world.

6.2 Type of Study

Qualitative research and its six types of studies, ethnographic, grounded theory, narrative analysis, critical, basic, and case study aim to construct a phenomenon through people's perceptions. However, a case study was the most appropriate for our research in view of the fact that it focused on collecting data about the adaptation process exchange students have at a public university in Pereira. Yin (2008) points out that a case study consists of investigating a particular phenomenon that occurs in a determined context or setting. In our case, the contemporary phenomenon was the exchange students' experiences at a public university in Pereira.

Different from what could be commonly assumed, a case study is more than a methodological option inasmuch as it influences both how the information is collected, and what is studied. In order to understand this, it is necessary to clarify that "case" refers to a specific matter of interest. In this way, the case would be the unit of analysis by which a wider phenomenon is understood. Therefore, in our research, the case was the exchange students of the first semester of 2020, who enabled us to understand the phenomenon of cultural misunderstandings.

The product that a case study provides is a rich description of what is studied. That is why, once the international students shared their experiences in the interviews, we went in-depth describing what their viewpoints were, explaining and interpreting them. By the same token, case studies enable the creation of knowledge that is more concrete and contextual, which was the purpose of collecting the information directly from participants. Likewise, carrying out the research with six participants allowed us to categorize it as a multi-case study since each student represented a case that was analyzed to find similarities and differences among them. An important aspect of multi-case study that Stake (2006) points out is that “the cases in the collection are somehow categorically bound together” (pp. 4-6), which means that the cases share some characteristics that make them part of the same group. This was evidenced in our participants under study, considering that all of them were foreign students, were part of an exchange program, and were temporarily at public university in Pereira.

6.3 Context

“Cultural Misunderstandings of Communication Among Exchange Students From Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Spain at a Public University in Pereira” is a study that took place in Colombia, a Latin American country located in the northwestern corner of South America. This country is divided into 32 departments, including Risaralda, whose capital is Pereira. In this city in which we conducted the research, there are around nine private and one public university. This university is an official national entity issued by the Congress of the Colombian Republic. According to Law 41 (1958), it was founded by Jorge Roa Martínez, the first principal of this institution. Over the years, the university started to offer professional, technological, and technical programs as well as PhDs,

specializations, and master's programs. Due to the fact that it offers more than 40 programs (undergraduate and postgraduate) and that it is an accredited university, it has led to alliances among universities from abroad. For that reason, students from undergraduate programs such as Music, Technology, Environmental Management, Child Pedagogy, and Industrial, Mechanical, and Electrical Engineering can be part of an exchange experience.

The academic programs are divided into the faculties of Fine Arts and Humanities, Environmental Sciences, Educational Science, Health Sciences, Business Sciences, Mechanical Engineering, Engineering, Technology, Agricultural Sciences and Agribusiness. Furthermore, the public university provides students the opportunity to be part of different extension courses and exchange programs, which are subject to requirements. Students can participate in cultural and recreational activities and sports, as well as receive socio-economic and psychosocial support. In terms of campus, the university has different buildings, cafeterias, study areas, auditoriums, and also a library, an astronomical observatory, a planetarium, a botanical garden, and an archaeological museum.

6.4 Setting

This university aims to provide students as many opportunities as possible to improve their professional curriculum and personal life. For this reason, it created the International Relations Office (ORI, by its Spanish acronym), which is directed by Maria Cristina Valderrama Alvarado who speaks French, Spanish, and English, and is in charge of accomplishing the purpose of this office. Its purpose is to promote international exchanges by creating and keeping agreements with international universities such as Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), Université du Québec à Rimouski

(UQR), Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto, among others. Hence, both teachers and students who belong to a public university in Pereira and fulfill the agreements' requirements can apply to do an exchange. Besides, this office encourages students from other countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Spain to arrive at this university to study one or two semesters through ASPUC and CREPUC agreements.

6.5 Participants

The participants of this research were six international students who stayed for one or two semesters in a higher education institution. They came from different countries around the world: one from Spain, two from Brazil, one from Argentina, and two from Mexico. This population was conformed by six female participants, whose ages ranged from 20 to 32 years. Most of them were between fifth and ninth semester of different faculties and undergraduate Industrial Engineering, Tourism, Child Pedagogy, and History programs.

The participants of this study were not randomly selected as we used the non-probability purposive sampling method explained by Crossman (2019). This sampling method was chosen due to the investigation's purpose, which was to understand how exchange students perceived the Colombian culture and if they experienced misunderstandings in terms of linguistic, cultural, and nonverbal components. Crossman describes the categories of purposive sampling, including homogenous sample. This last category consists of choosing the participants of a research who have certain characteristics in common. We chose this sample since we needed the population of our research to share some specific features such as being foreign students, participating in an exchange program, studying at a public university in Pereira, and having spent a couple of weeks in Colombia.

*Table 1**Participants Information.***Participants**

Participants	Age (y/o)	City	Country	Program	Semester	Time spent in Colombia (months)
<i>Subject 1</i>	21	Puebla	Mexico	Industrial Engineering	6th	3
<i>Subject 2</i>	29	Mérida	Mexico	Tourism	7th	3
<i>Subject 3</i>	25	Puerto Madryn	Argentina	Tourism	9th	3
<i>Subject 4</i>	32	Pamplona	Spain	Child Pedagogy	8th	3
<i>Subject 5</i>	23	Diamantina, Minas Gerais	Brazil	Tourism	8th	4
<i>Subject 6</i>	20	Diamantina, Minas Gerais	Brazil	History	5th	5

6.6 Data Collection Methods

In order to collect the data, we designed and implemented a virtual semi-structured interview. As Merriam (2009) points out, "Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behaviors, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (p.88). Our research implemented this method since our main purpose was to know how exchange students encountered and perceived the Colombian culture. The

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semi-structured interview, , which was recorded and transcribed, had predetermined questions that were supported by other questions that emerged during the implementation (see appendix 11.4). This instrument was designed for the exchange students to provide information about their perspectives, feelings, reactions, and experiences in this new culture. Its implementation took place in the first semester of 2020, between the second and the third week of May since we needed that they had spent a couple of weeks in the country to answer the interview's questions. At the moment of the interview, participants two and three had already returned to their countries due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of using semi-structured interviews was to make participants feel comfortable enough to share other experiences and anecdotes, providing us more authentic and reliable information.

Before carrying out the interviews, we implemented three pilotings. The first one was developed with one North American professor who currently lives in Colombia and works in the public university where the study was executed. One of the researchers was in charge of interviewing the professor while the others were recording his answers and taking notes about what he said. Doing that, it was possible to recognize that some questions needed to be supported by giving more information or examples.

The second piloting was with the exchange students from the second semester of 2019 with the purpose of identifying how clear and applicable were the questions designed after some changes. Our idea was not only to invite exchange students to participate in an interview; instead, we wanted them to have the experience of knowing more about the country, tasting some products and different kinds of coffee. In the event, four Mexican students attended the invitation which consisted of going through two stands to learn some information about exotic Colombian fruits and coffee. In the fruits

booth, we had chontaduro, starfruit, guayaba arazá, avocado, passion fruits (maracuya and granadilla), curuba, and lulo. In the coffee stand, participants listened to a barista talking about the characteristics of this important product for the country. Then, each student was simultaneously interviewed by one of the researchers. Those interviews were recorded and taken into consideration to publish or modify the questions. (see appendix 11.5)

We also considered important to conduct a third piloting, but this time with two classmates who had the experience of being part of academic exchanges in Canada and Brazil. This allowed us to identify which questions needed to be modified in terms of structure to be clearer, and what probe questions could be implemented. Our peers provided us with some suggestions to have a more accurate final version of the interview.

6.7 Researchers' Role

This research was conducted by a professor who was the main researcher as well as three co-researchers, who were students from the English Teaching Program at a public university in Pereira. The three students were Colombian women from 21 to 23 years old who were in the ninth semester of the program aforementioned. Their role in this project was to design the instruments to collect the data, implement them, and write the results. The professor guiding the investigation was a Colombian woman as well, who had taught an Intercultural Communication course and other subjects offered in the seventh semester. Her role was to lead and guide the co-researchers in the process of creating the paper, designing the instruments, collecting the data, and reporting the results.

Qualitative research provides a detailed description of a specific phenomenon in which researchers can play different roles. Therefore, we categorized ourselves in the observer-as-participant stance. This is one of the four theoretical stances for researchers conducting field observations explained by Gold (1958). He points out that this type of role is mostly "used in studies involving one-visit interviews" and that it includes formal observation or participation. This formal observation implies that we interacted with the exchange students letting them know what our research was about and what information we expected to obtain from their contributions.

As the main goal of the observer as participant is to gather information, we implemented a semistructured interview that sought not to influence the participants' answers. Furthermore, we recorded the interviews to analyze and select the relevant information for our cultural misunderstandings study. As exchange students could find difficult to understand some of the interview questions, our role was not completely played as observers. In those cases, we intervened and explained in order to clarify any possible linguistic or content doubt.

6.8 Ethical Considerations

For the purpose of ensuring the protection of human subjects in this study, some ethical considerations were taken into account. Mackey & Gass (2005) emphasize the importance of providing the subjects with sufficient information about the research to be conducted. Bearing this in mind, the participants of this qualitative research, which included exchange students from different programs at a public university in Pereira, were informed about the purpose, procedures, data collection instruments, and possible

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benefits of the study. They were told that their contributions will help researchers and educators to acknowledge intercultural differences, raising awareness of the importance of developing intercultural communicative competence. Additionally, the information collected from the exchange students could be used by the International Relations Office (ORI) to design and implement strategies to improve the foreign students' experiences during their stay in Colombia.

Participation in the project was completely voluntary, and individuals had the right to withdraw at anytime. Likewise, no names of participants were disclosed under any circumstance since we used pseudonyms to guarantee confidentiality. Besides, only the researchers and their advisor from the university could access the raw information, so data was not inappropriately divulged. Another important aspect to consider were the risks to which participants were exposed. However, after an evaluation of this project's methodology, it was determined that it was not going to jeopardize the participants' integrity.

The students participating in this research accepted a consent form (See Appendix 11.2) which specified that they will be recorded during the interview, and that their responses would be used for analyzing their experiences of living in another culture. Similar to students, the ORI accepted a consent form (See Appendix 11.1) to enable us to contact the exchange students.

To support the validity and reliability of the project and the findings, its structure and design were planned in advance based on well-known theory and literature relevant to the project's aim. For instance, the theory of cultural roadblocks explained by Hofstede

(2002) was taken as the basis to create the interview questions. Therefore, the format for the data collection instrument intended to collect trustworthy information that contributes to the research inquiries. In addition to the well-known theory and literature taken into account for the study, the instrument implemented (interview) had the purpose of collecting data regarding exchange students' perceptions of the contact with a new culture. The data collected by the instrument was analyzed to provide concise and valid results.

7. Findings

This study sought to analyze if exchange students experienced stumbling blocks according to the theory proposed by Hofstede (2002). He states that people can face cultural misunderstandings due to assumptions of similarity, language differences, misinterpreting non-verbal communication, preconceptions and stereotypes, immediate evaluation, and high anxiety or stress (internal noise) when interacting with a new culture, in this case, the Colombian one. We expected to find misunderstandings in terms of both verbal and non-verbal communication between the members of different cultures. However, although the interview included questions regarding non-verbal communication, there was little or no information provided by the interviewees regarding this aspect. It is important to clarify that all the interviews were conducted in Spanish since, although we gave them the option to do it in English, all the participants felt more comfortable using this language. Nevertheless, we translated the excerpts that will be presented in this section for the sake of clarity. Such translations will be presented right after the original excerpts.

7.1 Language Differences

All the participants experienced misunderstandings of verbal communication, but we will present only some of them, dividing them into international students whose first language is Spanish, and students whose native language is Portuguese.

7.1.1 Participants Find a Different Meaning or Conception of a Word.

7.1.1.1 Participants Whose First Language is Portuguese

A word is a speech sound or series of speech sounds that symbolizes and communicates a meaning. That meaning, however, may vary from one region to another due to the different cultural factors that shape each language. It was the case of two Brazilian participants who mentioned that the word “buseta” had a different meaning in their country. One of them said: “Buseta en Brasil es el órgano genital de la mujer”. [In Brazil the Spanish word buseta (a small bus) is used to refer to women genital organs]¹. Similarly, one of her partners confirmed this by saying: “Buseta" en Brasil es una palabra para vagina”. [In Brazil, “buseta” refers to vagina]². As the aforementioned examples illustrated, when immersing into a new culture we will not only find words that are completely new to us, but we may also find that some words that are part of both languages have different meanings in each one. To further exemplify, participant five also pointed out the different meaning of the word “polvo” in Colombia and Brazil, by stating “polvo” acá es polvo de harina, en Brasil, polvo es un animal. [“polvo” here is a flour, in Brazil, polvo is an animal]. Acknowledging those differences is the first step to become an effective communicator within a foreign scenario (Eades, 2003). This, at the

same time, is a starting point in the path of acquiring intercultural competence, which Spitzberg & Chagnon (2009) defined as “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world”. Tang (2006) also recognized the importance of the behavioral aspects in social interactions, adding that their interpretations are usually influenced by the context. It happens the same with vocabulary since people interpret the meaning of a word according to the context where they are.

7.1.1.2 Participants Whose First Language is Spanish

In the same way, the Argentinean participant found a difference in the way Colombian people pertain to a bus; she expressed: “Nosotros le decimos colectivo”. [We call it “colectivo”]¹, reaffirming that these variations can also occur in countries that share the same language, in this case, Spanish. This phenomena was reconfirmed by Amberg & Vause (2009) as well, highlighting that the community and the language should be related and share particular characteristics that enable establishing a legit communication. Participants from Spain and Mexico were able to witness this semantic diversity as well. The former mentioned “Para mí, bizcocho es como una torta”. [To me, “bizcocho” is like a cake”]¹ when telling that the Colombian word “bizcocho”, which alludes to a handsome man, is the same used in her country to allude to a cake. The latter pointed out “Lo que normalmente se conoce como sandwich, yo lo conozco como una torta”. [What is normally known as a sandwich, I know it as a “torta”]¹. This participant witnessed that the variety of images that come to people’s mind when hearing a word depends on their semantic background since, as Mantiri (2015) explained, “the language

is interpreted through personal (cultural) experience”. This bolsters that when talking about communicative differences, cultures that share the same linguistic codes are not the exception. In this sense, Berlo (2000) indicates that the meaning of a message can vary according to people’s interpretations, which are given by the context. For instance, in the case of the two Brazilian students, they identified that the word “buseta” in Colombia referred to a means of transport; instead of the female private part.

7.2 Exchange Students Face Difficulties to Ask for Something, for Directions, or to Express Themselves.

Performing daily life actions such as buying groceries can become a challenge when staying in another country. Although it could be assumed that communication misunderstandings happen only among speakers of different languages, three interviewees whose native language was Spanish experienced these difficulties here in Colombia, a Spanish-speaking country. Participant one from Mexico expressed having the necessity of seeing a product to let others know what she was looking for. She stated:

“Preguntaba: ¿dónde están los chícharos? y nada más decían: “¿chícharos?” o algo así. ¿las arvejas? sí, yo creo que son arvejas. yo veía la imagen y decía: “sí, sí, es lo mismo”. [I asked where are the chicharos? and people asked me: Chicharos? or something like that. Do you mean arvejas? Yes, I think that they are arvejas. I saw the picture and said: Yes, yes, that is the same.]¹

The previous excerpt shows that only one difference in the name of a product can become a barrier when trying to communicate a message. This can force speakers to use external resources to explain themselves even when they are native speakers of the same

language. Participant two, who was in Mexico at the moment of the interview, shared a similar situation in which she had to describe a product to obtain it. She said:

“Cuando iba preguntaba siempre por cosas que yo estaba acostumbrada cuando uno va acá al supermercado, que las hay y eso normal; y allá era como que las personas me veían :”¿de qué estás hablando? no entiendo”, y ya me tocaba como describir el producto y ya me decían la mayoría de las veces que no lo tenían”.

[When I went out, I always asked for things I used to buy at the supermarket, but in Colombia people stared at me like: “what are you talking about? I don't understand”, so I had to describe the product, and most of the time they told me they did not have it.]¹

In this case, the participant relied on the linguistic function of describing to overcome the language difference when asking for a product. Nevertheless, describing was not enough for participant three as, in some cases, she needed to search a picture on the internet to illustrate what vegetable she was asking for in the supermarket, mentioning: “Quería comer verduras [...] entonces tenía que buscar... alguna imagen de Google por ejemplo... para mostrar qué es lo que estaba buscando”. [“I wanted to eat vegetables, and... so I tried, so I had to search for an image in Google for example... to show what I was searching”].¹

The previous excerpt shows that the participant used linguistic signs to face the barriers when buying groceries. Samovar et al. (2009) explained that competent communicators are able to handle and overcome language differences when facing situations in another country. This ability would have been useful to one of our participants, who told us the following anecdote during the interview:

Una vez también me dijo un autobús ¿no? me iba a subir y me dijo: “No, es que está varado” y yo: “Ah, sí... toma el dinero” [...] y como que me dijo: “No, que está estropeado” y yo: “¡Ah! vale, estropeado. Es que no, no había entendido porque al principio, por no molestar, no sé, no había entendido lo que me había dicho y como que: “No, no, no, toma el dinero” ¿no? [...] es que nunca la había escuchado, la palabra “varado”.

[Once a bus (driver) told me, I was going to get on the bus and he told me "No, it is varado", and I (answered) "Oh, yes, take the money" and he told me like "No, it is broken" and I (said) "Oh! okay, broken". It is just that I didn't want to bother (driver) since I had not understood what he had told me and I was like “No, no, no, take the money” right? The thing is that I had not heard the word “varado”.]¹

Although our participant knew the language, her lack of knowledge of a word used in our culture affected her performance in this apparently simple situation. For that reason, when immersing into a culture is key to develop the linguistic competences and to be conscious of how the community works. In this way, the subject will avoid becoming a speaker without awareness of the behaviours and language in the target group as explained by Bennett et al. (2003). In the same way, Usó et al. (2006) affirmed that a competent communicator should integrate discourse, linguistic, pragmatic, strategic, and intercultural competences, focusing on the importance of the latest. They prioritize intercultural competence arguing that it allows speakers to be aware of the cultural differences in order to interact effectively in certain scenarios. Given these points, the participants faced these difficulties due to their lack of linguistic and cultural knowledge in terms of vocabulary. Still, they achieved their communicative goal by using different

strategies, which is a characteristic of developing intercultural communication competence.

7.3 Exchange Students Admit Having Preconceptions of Colombia.

Thoughts are human constructions based on their life experiences, highly aligned with feelings, and may be positive or negative. Those thoughts may also occur based on what we hear from others' experiences, which may become a stereotype. Most of the participants of this study had those ideas about Colombia, before visiting this country. Participant one stated: Desafortunadamente uno de los temas que sí vincula mucho a Colombia es la parte de la historia de este personaje que es Pablo Escobar. [Unfortunately, one of the topics that is associated with Colombia is the part of the history of this character, Pablo Escobar]¹.

The previous excerpt clearly evidenced that even though she had not been in Colombia, she had a preconception of this country since Pablo Escobar is a well-known character of Colombia around the world, and a big amount of people know his history based on what others said. A similar case occurred with the second participant from Mexico, who pinpointed that:

“Como que de entrada es mucho la fama o de Colombia, sí es como eso, esa parte ¿no? del narcotráfico y que se ve como en las series y tal, pero realmente no iba como con la idea de que solo eso era Colombia, así que [...] como a parte de cómo se mueve la droga, la prostitución, igual como que escuchaba mucho que Colombia es peligroso, las calles pues como inseguro.” [At the first moment, the

fame of Colombia is that part, right? drug trafficking, and it can be seen like in the series, but I did not have the idea that Colombia, so [...] Apart from how the drug and prostitution businesses are, I also heard a lot that Colombia is dangerous, the streets like insecure]¹ .

The case of our second participant highly demonstrated that she had some ideas or thoughts about Colombia from what she heard in her home country, which Dovidio et al. (2010) defined as a stereotype, being a conviction about the features and details of a specific community or group of people that each human has. Notwithstanding, she did not internalize those preconceptions since according to Alexander et al. (1999), it is a hard process to change or not internalize those stereotypes that we heard. Our third participant also heard those stereotypes before traveling, pointing out: “Tenía muchísimo la imagen de tráfico, drogas, cosas así, porque infelizmente es una imagen general” [I had the picture (in my mind) of drug trafficking, drugs, things like that since, unhappily, it is a general picture]¹ .

The previous excerpt of our participant from Brazil highlighted the general image of Colombia around the world, which is a thought about our history. In regard to those stereotypes, Schimdt et al (2007) bolster that they are our abstract pictures about our surroundings, meaning that they are an image or belief we have on our brains of someone or something based on the overgeneralization of facts, others’ opinions, news, among others sources.

7.5 International Students Evidence Similar and Different Behaviors Between Their

Culture and the Colombian one.

One of the first things that we could assume when planning to visit a new culture is that we will find many things that are totally different from the ones we are used to. Although most of the time this is an accurate assumption, we may also notice similarities with our own culture. All of our participants found differences, but some of them also recognized aspects that their country and Colombia share in common. Participant one, from Mexico, perceived a difference regarding the degree of people's friendliness. During our interview, she said: “Yo considero que los mexicanos somos como que más abiertos, más amigables” [I consider that we, Mexicans, are like more open, more friendly]¹.

This impression may have been given due to the fact that despite the humour and kindness to which Colombians are regularly linked, it is not very common to be highly affectionate in terms of body contact when meeting new people, which participant six could witness herself. This Brazilian participant mentioned: “En Brasil, son dos besitos cuando nosotros saludamos... cuando la primera semana, la primera clase, cuando yo me estaba despidiendo de... los compañeros y yo así: (gestos de besos) y todo mundo: “¿qué?” [In Brazil we give two kisses when greeting each other... when in the first week (in Colombia), in the first class, when I was saying goodbye to my classmates I was like: (Makes kisses' gestures) and everybody was like “What?”]¹

As we can see in the previous excerpt, participant six's Colombian classmates were surprised when she gave kisses as a farewell gesture, making clear an intercultural distinction. On the other hand, participant three highlighted a similarity between her Argentinian culture and the Colombian one, saying that: “No es demasiada distancia porque también dan abrazos, yo acá con mis amigas me abrazo cada que las veo,”

[It is not so much distance because they (Colombians) also give hugs... Here, my friends and I always give hugs every time we see each other]¹

She pointed out how akin two cultures can be in certain behaviors even when they highly differ in other aspects. Although these differences may have aroused both positive and negative reactions among international students, they did not lead to misunderstandings of communication in these particular cases. This is due to the fact that discrepancies are not always a problem, in fact, Kinginger (2010b) indicates that these types of situations can be turned into opportunities for learning. Such experiences are an incredible source of knowledge not only about others but also about our own culture and ourselves. On the other hand, while the aforementioned author addressed an advantage of intercultural encounters, Walker (2000) warned that they can also be “extremely disconcerting, if not actually physically dangerous”. This was not the case of any of the exchange students we interviewed; however, the fact that all of them were from Latin American or Spanish-speaking countries may have played a role in preventing such negative scenarios. No matter the case, comprehending diversity at the national level may facilitate positive outcomes (Woszczynski et al. 2016). In addition, when getting to know a new culture we should be observant of both the similarities and differences we find in comparison to our country, considering that all of them provide us valuable information that we can use to become effective members of any community.

7.6 Exchange Students Experience Different Feelings during Their stay in Colombia.

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Emotions are a set of reactions and behaviors experienced by individuals according to their current situations or surroundings. Some of them are fear, stress, anxiety, happiness, sadness, pleasure, satisfaction, disappointment, anger, discomfort, and confusion. In the case of the exchange students, they faced an unknown country and culture which could make them feel insecure and uncomfortable, but they could also feel excited about being in a new culture. However, there is not a general factor to identify what emotions they will feel and for how long. In other words, one of the Brazilian participants expressed she lived different emotions when arriving in Colombia and interacting with others. She said:

“Cuando llegué, quedé muy feliz porque no imaginaba que sería tan bueno, pero en las dos primeras semanas, yo lloré mucho (risas), yo quería volver a Brasil, me quedé con muchísima ira porque no comprendía nada que las personas hablaban y no tenía paciencia de querer comprender también, entonces fue muy complicado”. [When I arrived (in Colombia) I was happy because I did not imagine that Colombia would be so good, but during the first two weeks, I cried a lot (laughs). I wanted to come back to Brazil. I felt a lot of anger as I did not understand anything about what people said and I did not have the patience to want to comprehend, so it was very difficult]¹.

The previous excerpt shows how being in a new culture made the participant experience what is called culture shock. In her case, it was featured by feeling excitement, homesickness, and frustration. Besides, she went through the excitement and disenchantment phases of this phenomenon since at the beginning she had positive expectations regarding the country she was going to be immersed into. Later on, she was aware of their new reality facing the challenge of a new language. (Samovar, 2012).

Similarly, another Brazilian participant shared that she felt different emotions before travelling and once she arrived. She affirmed:

“Cuando llegué a Colombia, (el) día 25 de enero, llegué (a) llorar... Y. ¡Ay! Es un sueño para mí hacer un intercambio y para mí Colombia fue una puerta que abrí...Y yo tenía un poco de tristeza de parte de mi familia que estaba lejos... Ansiedad, yo tenía mucha ansiedad de venir, de conocer las cosas”. [When I arrived in Colombia on January 25th, I cried. Oh! It is such a dream for me to participate in an exchange and for me, Colombia was a door that I opened (an opportunity). I felt a little bit of sadness as my family was far away. Anxiety, I felt a lot of anxiety to come here and know the things]¹

The previous participants expressed that they had a lot of expectations of being in Colombia since they considered that knowing a new country represented an enriching professional and personal experience. Moreover, the last one went through one of the four stages of culture shock proposed by Samovar (2012), the excitement phase. She explained that it was a dream to be part of an academic exchange; however, at the same time she experienced other emotions such as homesickness and anxiety while adjusting to a new setting and culture. On the other hand, participant three indicated feeling fear and stress when arriving in Colombia, so she shared her experience:

“Me daba un poco de miedo por el hecho de que no iba a estar en Bogotá, la misma ciudad de dos amigas mías (que había hecho hace meses)...La dueña de la residencia (en Pereira) me había dicho que me iba a buscar... pero uno es desconfiado de por sí, (risas)... Toda esa situación fue un poco tensa hasta que me relajé... uno se imagina en cualquier lado, digo, no sé, puede ser una red de secuestros (risas) no sé, esas cosas de película”. [I was afraid of not being in Bogotá, the same city of two friends that I had met two months

ago (before travelling)...The owner of the house in Pereira (where I was going to stay during my academic exchange) had told me that she was going to pick me up...,but everyone is distrustful in itself... All this situation was a little bit tense until I relaxed... I imagined...anywhere. I mean, I do not know, it could be a kidnapping ring (laughs). I do not know, things like in the movies.]]¹

For the participant, it was not only stressful to arrive in the country but she was also afraid of knowing who was going to welcome her in the city. Likewise, she pointed out:

“Enseguida llegó un amigo que vive en Manizales que fue a recibirme que es un chico que yo había conocido acá, en Argentina. Entonces como que ese día se pasó super bien porque fuimos a conocer un poco la ciudad. Ya conocerla con él me dio otra seguridad porque no salí enseguida sola a tener que buscar algo, sino que recorrimos algunos puntos y ya me dio un pantallazo más o menos de la ciudad, y estar acompañada fue fundamental”. [Then, one friend who lives in Manizales was going to pick me up. I had met him here, in Argentina, so I had a good time that day as we went out to know a little bit the city. To explore the city with him gave me another kind of security inasmuch as I did not have to go out alone to look for something immediately; instead we toured some parts (of the city) and it gave me a picture about the city. Being accompanied (by someone) was fundamental”]]¹.

This indicates that people can experience different emotions in the same situation according to the levels of security and comfortability they feel in the new country. For that reason, it is helpful to have friends in the host culture to go through the adjustment process effectively (Furnham, 2010).

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Despite the participants having positive expectations regarding Colombia, their arrival made them react differently. According to Harvey and Park (2014), they experienced “culture shock in response to the transition from one culture setting to another”(p.355). This due to exchange students faced a completely new experience and setting, making them feel insecure and afraid of what they could find. Culture shock is considered an obstacle to keeping effective interactions since disregarding invisible aspects of the new culture can lead to noticeable negative mental and emotional consequences (Saylag, 2014). Nonetheless, it is a common process that these participants experienced for being in an unknown country, but they were able to overcome it throughout their stay. From another perspective, Zhou et al. (2008) point out that culture shock can be seen as an opportunity to develop cultural skills to interact with others even if it can cause stress, insecurity, and fear when encountering a new culture. It can be evidenced that culture shock is a natural process that people need to go through when facing a new setting in order to adjust to the culture.

7.7 Interviewees are Surprised to Find Differences Between Their own Culture and the Foreign one

There is a distinction between finding a difference and being surprised at finding a difference: we are surprised by the unexpected. As mentioned above, when about to start an adventure within a new context, we predict that we will find aspects that vary from one culture to another. Usually, people expect to find differences in the traditions, folklore, music, food, and all those easily visible aspects of a culture. Nonetheless, attitudes, values, and beliefs are sometimes disregarded. This last component was what surprised two of our participants. When asked about what had surprised her during her

international exchange, participant three told one of the researchers: “La religión tan... tan presente, cotidianamente...el saludo más común era “bendiciones” o “gracias a Dios”, “si Dios quiere”, siempre había una frase presente...religiosa. Eso me sorprendió también.” [Religion so... so present, diurnally... the most common greeting was “blessings” or “thanks to god”, “if God wants”, there was always a religious phrase present]¹. That surprised me too. She explained that this was very unusual in her country of origin, Argentina. In the same vein, when talking about religion, participant four stated: “En España cada vez va a menos ¿no? y la gente joven nunca diría “Gracias a dios”[In Spain it is becoming less and less popular, right? and young people would never say “Thanks to God”]¹.

Both participants were surprised when they found that, unlike in their countries of origin, religion, more specifically Christianity, was still strongly popular and practiced in Colombia. Since that was not the case in their culture, they probably thought that the panorama would be the same in the new culture. Such an idea can appear conscious or unconsciously, and it has been called Assumption of Similarity. It is worth mentioning that this is considered a stumbling block (barrier) to effective intercultural communication, and that, although the previous examples were related to beliefs, people can also assume similarity between simple practices and social behaviors. Participant one mentioned thereon: “Me pareció extraño es que cuando ponen como piezas de reggaeton haya hombres que inviten a mujeres a bailar... porque en México nunca, o sea, no, es que no es común que alguien te invite a bailar reggaeton”[It seemed strange to me that when a reggaeton song is played, there are men who invite women to dance... because in Mexico never, I mean, no, it is just not common that someone invites you to dance reggaeton]¹.

She proceeded to explain that, in Mexico, when a person invites someone to dance this type of music, it is because they are dating or being in a relationship already. In Colombia, on the opposite side, it would be no surprise that two people who just met at a club were dancing reggaeton together. The previous anecdote was an example of a behavior that can be assumed to be the same in our culture as in others, but it is clear that they did not represent an obstacle to effective intercultural communication. However, assuming that a certain behavior or word is acceptable in any given situation is an example of what could turn into a stumbling block to effective communication, and even lead to a misunderstanding. As reminded by Schyve (2007), members of cultures that share a language would not be exempt from facing cultural contrasts. This is due to the fact that culture does not only encompass the language and traditional elements that characterize a community, it is also “the systemic totality of the processes of meaningful relating to others that is the basis for affectively charged meaning-making processes” (Gamsakhurdia, 2020). In fact, even assuming that a certain gesture has the same meaning in both our culture of origin and the target culture could hinder an interaction since, as Hall (2000) affirmed, meaning is completely context-dependent.

8. Unexpected Findings

This study was developed with the purpose of gathering information about cultural roadblocks that impede communication. However, analyzing the data collected, we noticed extra information that could be of great value to the field. The following insight was not part of our research question, but we consider it relevant and meaningful since it emerged from the data analysis. The following characteristic of Colombian

people was perceived by almost all participants who described them as kind people based on their different encounters and interactions.

8.1 Students Perceived Colombians as Kind People.

Several researchers recommend that members from different cultures should develop intercultural competence, considered as the ability to effectively interact with people from different contexts. It is suggested due to the fact that each culture has its own characteristics that make it unique. To exemplify, Colombia is a worldwide recognized country for its empathetic citizens. Participant one experienced this, she mentioned: “Definitivamente, Colombia me ha sorprendido demasiado, la amabilidad de al menos de la gente de esta región”. Definitely, Colombia has surprised me a lot, at least the kindness of this region’s people. Our participant’s viewpoint explicitly confirms this general thought about Colombian people. On top of that, it can be understood that Colombians have intrapersonal and mental wellness which according to Sandage & Jankowski (2013) is a key characteristic to be interculturally competent. It is important to highlight that our participant stated that colombian people are empathetic, which Merriam-Webster dictionary defines as the capacity of being conscious of others' emotions and situations to assertively convey a message. Aligned with our first participant’s case, participant four shared a similar experience, pointing out that: “ La gente Colombiana, que es muy, que es muy amable... siempre dispuesta a ayudarte” [Colombian people is very kind... they are always willing to help you]¹.

The previous excerpt indicates that Colombian people have one characteristic of intercultural competence, which is empathy. To illustrate, Arasaratnam (2016) indicates that intercultural competence is a set of skills that enables a person to interact with

members of different cultures. As a matter of fact, Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009) strongly support Arasatnam's (2016) viewpoint, approaching that Intercultural Competence is the efficient and functional communication that people from different backgrounds establish by being aware of their similarities and differences.

9. Conclusions

This research aimed to discover if international students from Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and Spain experienced misunderstanding during their academic exchange in Pereira, Colombia. It particularly focused on misunderstandings of communication related with the cultural roadblocks proposed by Hofstede, which are assumptions of similarity, language difference, misinterpreting non-verbal communication, preconceptions and stereotypes, immediate evaluation, and high anxiety or stress (internal noise). After having collected the insights and contributions from the exchange students who were part of the study Cultural Misunderstandings of Communication Among Exchange Students From Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Spain at a Public University in Pereira, the results displayed that misinterpretations occurred mainly due to the linguistic differences, more specifically, in verbal communication. We were able to identify this based on a rigorous transcription and analysis of the semistructured interviews that were carried out with each of the six participants. During their implementation, interviewees were able to share anecdotes, opinions, and perspectives. Among those opinions, it is worth mentioning that some of the participants affirmed that their adaptation process was easier since they had been in foreign scenarios or interacted with other cultures in the past. For instance, participant four told one of the researchers that she had already lived in countries such as Germany, Ireland, and Brazil for a considerable period of time. Similarly, our Argentinean participant admitted having few or no problems adjusting to this country's culture since she had the opportunity to become friends with some Colombian students that were part of an academic exchange in Argentina. She

highlighted the fact that interactions and experiences with them allowed her to grasp knowledge not only about the Colombian culture in general, but even about specific expressions and phrases. Besides, participants from Brazil and Argentina looked for information about Colombia before travelling, allowing them to have a picture about the country.

What has been exposed above brings light to a basic element required to become an efficient member of any culture: knowledge. According to Samovar et al. (2009), along with motivation, knowledge is one of the most important components of intercultural communication competence, and it can be divided into content and procedural knowledge. The first one refers to all the information that a person has acquired about a culture, whereas the second one alludes to what extent he or she is able to use that knowledge in the new, unfamiliar context. Turning to the component of motivation, Samovar et al. (2009) explain that it is key to be enthusiastic when immersing into a new culture and interacting with new people in order to have positive outcomes and performance. It was the case of participant two, who expressed that she was highly motivated and willing to learn how Colombians behave, so it facilitated her stay in Colombia.

Skills are also essential when developing interculturality since they allow visitors to learn behaviors, traditions, and practices from the host culture. Besides, foreigners should be willing to adjust to the new context using strategies such as observing, listening, and interpreting what people do. In that sense, they could be able to identify what behavioral patterns are appropriate in the new context and which are not. Apart from the previous elements, sensitivity is considered fundamental when encountering a new social background given that it integrates subskills to be culturally competent. According to Pittinsky et al. (2007), it is necessary for people to be open-minded, comprehensive, willing to accept differences, and intrigued about other cultures inasmuch

as these characteristics help people identify and be aware of how members of other cultures perform.

Considering that participants showed evidence of the previously described elements of intercultural communication competence, and that some of them argued that their classmates or teachers were attentive and patient to let them know when and why a misunderstanding of communication occurred, we can conclude that the analyzed stumbling blocks were not an obstacle for them to communicate with the Colombian Culture. Although certain students had preconceptions regarding this country, experienced different emotions, and identified unfamiliar behavioral patterns, these conditions and situations did not negatively influence their social interactions. Even in situations where linguistic differences in terms of vocabulary lead to misinterpreting a message, most of the participants could clarify what they did not understand at that moment. This not only helped them to avoid critical cases of cross-cultural, but also raised their awareness in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity.

9. Limitations of the study

There were some factors that influenced the possibilities of developing this project, limiting it. Focusing on the limitations, it is necessary to mention that part of this research was developed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such a virus forced us to replace the face-to-face interviews we had planned with distant meetings through a video calls platform. Given that, we did not have the opportunity to gather information about international students' non-verbal communication, which we could have witnessed by ourselves during the implementation rather than relying on their contributions regarding those matters. Their contributions, although highly helpful, were sometimes incomplete because they could not remember certain details or because we did not make enough

questions to guide them. For example, when asked about words that they realized have a different meaning here in Colombia, one participant told an anecdote about a product, and we did not ask which product it was. This limited the specificity of the examples presented in some findings. Still, we consider that participants offered us a great source of information with their valuable contributions. In spite of these limitations, we strongly believe that the objectives of this investigation could be successfully achieved.

10. Further Research

After analyzing the interviews' transcriptions, it was possible to identify topics or aspects frequently mentioned by the participants. One of those topics was coffee since, apparently, it keeps being of interest among people who come to visit Colombia. Many participants of this study had investigated this before traveling. Colombian coffee does not simply represent a traditional drink of this country; it involves a whole sort of subculture. In fact, one of this country's regions is named "the coffee belt" and its inhabitants are members of the "coffee culture", which encompasses cultural elements from clothes, specific cars, and even architecture, among others. That is why this area offers a great opportunity for researchers to explore and contribute to different tourism and cultural related fields.

Another aspect that called participants' attention was the use of "tú/usted". Half of them noticed that it is more common to use "usted" and some of them even tried to use it more frequently in a form of adaptation to the culture. In Colombia, this distinction is sometimes used for specific purposes. For example, using "usted" to sound more respectful, or "tú" to flirt. This is not a rule but an illustration. Such distinction could be a source of knowledge from both linguistic and cultural perspectives. In the same vein, two participants noticed the importance of the use of the word "señora/señor" in certain cases,

which deepening could also contribute to the aforementioned fields.

In terms of intangible cultural aspects, two participants also pointed out an evident machismo, overall based on situations they faced walking on the streets. Such uncomfortable situations included men following them, making comments, or sounds to try to catch their attention. Whereas in countries such as Argentina and Spain feminist movements have gained popularity, in Colombia they are not very strong yet. That being said, a study on these social issues would be pertinent as well.

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